the landscape after cruelty

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by whentheteacupshatters (RUNNFROMTHEAK)

Summary

Smoke swirls, the autumnal crunch of leaves beneath his boots, a boat on the sea in his periphery.

Teeth, big white teeth, smiling and growling and too big to be human.

“A pack of one gets lonely, Dr. Lecter,” *whispered in his ear, wet and hot.* “Let me return your gift of peace.”

Enjoy.

Enjoy.

Enjoy.

(Hannibal cuts himself on his teeth and Randall Tier's, and watches the blood drain away.)

Reality is a construction of the mind's perception. Unfortunately, Hannibal Lecter's perception has changed without his consent.

Notes

Day 1 for FAD's Ten Days of Horror: Werewolves

Beta by Kai_99, but all mistakes are mine!

See the end of the work for more notes

My dragonfly,

my black-eyed fire,

the knives in the kitchen are singing for blood,

but we are the crossroads, my little outlaw, and this is the map of my heart,

the landscape after cruelty which is, of course, a garden,

which is a tenderness, which is a room,

a lover saying *Hold me tight, it's getting cold.*

-Richard Siken

Hannibal shivers, when he wakes, something innately *wrong* before he even opens his eyes. Perhaps it's the goosebumps he can feel prickled across his flesh, or the wheat field buried beneath blankets of snow that he finds himself tangled in. Perhaps it's the scent of copper and musk, mixed with the morning breeze. Perhaps it's the morning sun, shining down on him like a judgment he doesn't yet understand, as he opens his eyes to the world and finds himself nude.

What it really is, he discovers, is a mix of all these things, paired with the subdued flicker of panic, when he reaches for a recollection of last night, and finds a void instead.

Hannibal Lecter has done many things in his lifetime, shades of murder and madness declared taboo and evil, but the one thing he's never done is something so mundane as *forget* . He remembers everything, casts the useless bits to smaller rooms, piling it away for a time he might need it, unbothered if he never does. He can recall the name of every patient he's had, the address of every victim, the birthday of every professor or mentor he sought favor with. He knows things with every breath, and can count the beats of his heart as a memory's metric.

But there's nothing. Not a fade to black, not a false recreation made by the mind's errant whims, not a hint of dissociation, nor the (highly unlikely) memory of too many drinks.

He doesn't feel drugged. He's not been roofied.

But he's nude, bare to the morning sun in a foreign field.

Field Kabuki, he thinks with a hint of humor. No antlers impale him, in this instance, and he doesn't feel as though he's been impaled by any other unwanted objects.

A strange taste lingers on his tongue, a sweet-savory thing that's both familiar and foreign. Pleasant and execrable. The white, sharp, jut of something caught between teeth.

Hannibal shakes it off, brushing dirt and wheat from his limbs as he stands. A bead of water – melting ice, shaken from his hair – trickles down the back of his neck, gliding down the curve of his spine until it falls somewhere he can't quite track.

It's cold. The faint suggestion of cold, crystals prickling against his skin, melting under his form. This numbing landscape of white, nothing real or concrete in sight, is as disconcerting as any other aspect of this

When he blinks, snowflakes tangle in his eyelashes. He looks at the sun's reflection, shining against every drop of unicity – each different, each a fingerprint of its own – and something in him burns.

Hannibal breathes, feels the steady pulse of his heart at his wrist, in his chest, on his tongue. The reverberating echo of it, throbbing, shifting, altering–

He shuts down, stills his features, focuses on the drops of snow and the chill of a winter morning.

Mountain range against the landscape, open fields blanketed by winter's embrace, the absence of life or city light.

Black, black moonlight, liquid tendrils pulled from his fractured memory to leave this roiling fog descending over his Memory Palace. The tendrils are slick, in their stranglehold over his foundation. They sound like a harp, plucked strand by strand to a tune of someone's composition. He wonders if it was his, or someone else's.

The question, the one he avoids thinking, hums in the air as he stands - legs shaky, muscles sore - and begins the journey towards the road.

He finds a stray set of clothes that appear to be his in a box, wrapped like an early Christmas present.

His phone, wallet, and car keys are in the pockets. His Bentley is parked just out of sight, on the side of the road. He doesn't remember leaving it there. He doesn't remember much of anything, it seems.

Enjoy, a slip of parchment says, scrawled in an unfamiliar writing.

A Gift, a warning, or a message.

He wonders, curiosity piqued, which it is.

Hannibal tells himself he's unconcerned.

(The tremble in his hand betrays him.)

He scans himself in the shower, looking for marred skin of unknown origins – abrasions and lesions he might have attained between sunset and sunrise – searching for memories in swirls of dirt and grime down the drain.

Nothing greets him, nothing but the pulsing headache building behind closed lids, nothing but the curiosity creeping beyond its normal constraints. Nothing but bits and pieces of evidence, of a night he does not know.

The only oddity, the only unstitched seam he finds among the canvas of skin and musculature he's built, the mind he's reconstructed, is his eyes. A wild look lingers, the haze of a predator in a corner, the fever of a prey on the run. He blinks it away, between the steady stream of water, but it lingers.

Like a bruise.

Like a scar.

Like a mark.

(He doesn't know of what.)

Will arrives like a blizzard in the cover of darkness, throwing his door open without care for permission, scattering flakes of white ash across the wood floor.

There's a body, cradled in his arms. It's familiar, spread across Hannibal's dining room table, an offered mouse.

Randall Tier, his ex-patient.

Will looks at him, neutral-faced, and Hannibal wonders what he's thinking behind those sleet eyes.

"I sent someone to kill you, you sent someone to kill me."

Hannibal tries to think, tries to push past his brain's pounding protests, but nothing comes. Nothing remembered, past the memory of turning his key in the Bentley's ignition as the sky began to darken. He doesn't recall the meeting, the words exchanged. He doesn't know for certain he even arrived, but he doesn't need to. The body on his dining room table is evidence enough of his machinations.

Will's neutrality is traded for a smirk, wild-fire eyes drawing Hannibal in like the allure of a nicotine high.

“Even Steven.”

Hannibal’s lip quirks at that, subconscious.

“Consider it an act of reciprocity.”

“Polite society normally places such a taboo on taking a life,” Will counters, near teasing as their eyes lock.

“Without death, we'd be at a loss. It's the prospect of death that drives us to greatness.”

Will looks away, mouth slanted in a frown as he flexes his bandaged hands. Hannibal looks at them appraisingly, carefully, and feels a shock of pleasure at his conclusion.

“Did you kill him with your hands?”

Will accepts his touch, not quite welcoming it, not quite pulling away. Neutral. Infuriatingly neutral.

(He wonders what exactly kept him away, when he’d planned his test so wonderfully.)

“It was intimate.”

The intimacy of a noose, stuttering breaths and restless release coaxed from its touch, its damning caress. Only, Will is the noose; a noose Hannibal welcomes.

“It deserves intimacy. You were Randall Tier’s final enemy,” he vocalizes, letting the thought spiral between the two of them as confirmation, as a reminder.

Will nods, letting Hannibal lead him into the kitchen. Hannibal is careful with him, gentle, centering himself in the brush of skin, unwinding the woven fabric bandages. In the hot water and swirls of pink, tracing the callused palm of Will’s hands to cleanse them, heal them. In the ointment, cold and slick, that he applies to the knuckles of Will’s hands. In the bandages he grabs from his kit, and wraps Will with.

Will watches him with unnerving focus, as though Hannibal is the singular specimen he’s dedicated to studying. Hannibal doesn’t make eye contact, as he does this kindness. He’s not quite up to feeling bared, right now.

There’s a swirling flush in his skin, a lukewarm wave, when Will hesitates. Eyes scanning Hannibal’s face, brow furrowed, and he doesn’t know what is and isn’t revealed, if Will can see the embrace of snow he’d woken to find, if Will can see the gaps in memory where no gaps should exist.

“I came here last night,” Will says, vexation coloring his tone. “You weren’t here.”

“I was out,” Hannibal replies, breezing past Will with a wave of his hand. “I didn’t know to expect the gift of your company, Will, or I’d have been prepared.”

“Where were you, exactly?”

Hannibal squeezes the bandaged hands once, not so tight as to sting, but enough to be a warning. A caution sign Will would be wise to heed.

When he smiles, it’s rows of teeth, razor sharp as they flash to remind Will precisely who he’s dealing with. *What* he’s dealing with.

“I don’t believe that’s a concern of yours.” When Will makes an expression that suggests otherwise, Hannibal breaks away, breaks eye contact, something rattling deep down in the barren corners of his mind’s creation. “Tell me, what will you do with him, now that he’s dead?”

(It’s an absent-minded sort of focus he offers Will, the calculated nod or hum of approval. The image Will presents is vivid, befitting of this creature Hannibal coaxed to the surface, but there’s an aftertaste to it that’s a shade off.

He helps Will lift the body back into his vehicle, helps him clean the car of forensic evidence, and watches him take Randall apart and put him back together in a way that makes him whole. The *wrongness* persists; the acute feeling of something missing, something absent, from the gore and dissections splayed over the museum bones. He doesn’t know the entirety of the wrongness, the context of the gut feeling roiling about him, and so he says nothing.

It lacks poetry, despite the cyclicality and beauty of this display.

Hannibal tastes blood, and tells Will it’s perfect.)

When Hannibal dreams of it in swaths of vapor – fickle things that drift with the clouds and sway of wheat fields – the tableau glows. Crimson radiance spills out from it into the languid darkness of the museum like a beacon. A lighthouse, beckoning him to shore. The bones rattle in place, gnawing, cracking, whittling at each other in their desperate need to be heard; a death call he doesn’t speak the language of, a church bell for a more primal type of gathering.

Randall’s teeth are flat and dulled by Will’s ferocity, by Will’s fists, and they mock him.

His eyes are wide and earnest, even in his venerated state of parts and pieces stitched together with borrowed fishhook ribs and yawning jaws. They stare, out from the darkness, amid the spill of crimson light, through Hannibal.

See? They say, the pierce of glass shards through a throat, the cut of scalpel through skin. He’s dissected before his dead protégé, called forth to be seen and to see in turn. *See?*

There’s tendrils of darkness wrapped around his mind, an ignorance he’s entrenched in.

He winds his way down the haunted halls, dancing in flickers of candlelight as the wax spills across the dais and pews, rising up the church floor, and still the bones rattle, still the beacon beckons.

See?

Hannibal doesn't see, blinded by things unknown.

When he wakes, it's in sweat-soaked sheets, trembling limbs, and a pulse of heat that is abnormal. He changes the sheets, takes relaxants, and sleeps nude.

(It doesn't work. He wonders why.)

Time crawls day by day.

Jack Crawford's gaze is leaden, weighing heavy on Hannibal and Will. Jack lacks proof, lacks the concrete certainty of evidence in the form of microfibers or soil samples, DNA or faulty alibis, but that doesn't halt his conviction on the sentence he pictures behind his righteous eyes.

It's amusing, watching the man dance around in a game of pretend, pretending he doesn't think of Hannibal as a monster only worthy of contempt, pretending his trust for Will hasn't been undercut by doubt, pretending that Hannibal is still the man that had invited him to dinner and saved his wife's life. Hannibal delights in all of this, the knowledge of Jack's knowledge entertaining like a controlled fire. He knows its destructive capabilities. He doesn't fear them any more than he fears God's judgment. It's all far too funny.

Will must think so too, by the way he talks, the ringing humor in his voice as he wanders Hannibal's office, fingers brushing over the collection of books thoughtlessly, comfortably. At ease in his presence. Will's in good humor most of the time, contempt discarded for the easy intimacy of like-minded company, studying the kills of those less efficient, less dangerous, and sending Jack Crawford to them.

In the liminal space of Hannibal's bedroom, Alana Bloom clings to him; waves of jasmine and pink-cheeked passion, aching to prove him to be the man she thinks he is. He allows her attempts, entertains them, if only for the way Will's eyes glint, tracing the marks she leaves that Hannibal doesn't cover.

He pretends to enjoy it, suffocating on her petal-sweet perfume that he once enjoyed. It's overwhelming, when his lips press against her skin and he can taste the sheen of perfume not

yet soaked in. He can smell the ink she'd used taking notes, the brand of parchment she'd purchased recently, the brush of Jack Crawford against her coat's shoulder–

"Hannibal?" she asks, nude and lovely before him. He's pressed between her thighs and fading into sensations, smelling her arousal and his fading desire, smelling the floral wafts caught on the breeze through the open window, the scent of his cologne and aftershave, the memory of blood coating his skin along with dirt and wheat.

He kisses her to silence her voice, and tries to focus on her scent. Her perfume. Her arousal. Her presence.

It doesn't work, pressing inside her to try and find himself. Searching for his outline in hers in clouds of smoke.

He drifts, fucking her without intent or mindfulness.

She doesn't notice.

(*Will would have,* Hannibal can't help thinking. He wills the thought to burn, and he doesn't let it come back.)

Abigail learns the harpsichord, the notes and scales, can play the keys with her eyes closed, and knows the most basic of pieces. It's a simple pleasure, but potent. The same he'd once felt amid the fall of snow, teaching Mischa how to read.

She looks at him with Will's blue eyes and Mischa's soft hands, and he wants to protect her. To keep her safe, in this little glass cage on the edge of the sea. To keep her from Jack Crawford's scrutiny, and Freddie Lounds' lack of boundaries or self-preservation.

He wants to keep her, in general. Wants to hold her here where she's safe from all, where she's subject to his influence alone, where she can't leave.

It's tempting, the image: his daughter, a lovely songbird in her cage, mournful tunes resonating through the bars, but kept protected by them all the same.

It's cruel, the image. The type of cruelty he's never found pleasurable, the restriction and possession of another person beyond reasonability, beyond rationality.

He watches her delicate fingers as they hook and pluck chords from the harpsichord. It isn't perfect, she stutters and stumbles over the bridges, hesitates when she should push forward, but there is a distinct beauty to it. To the smile she gives when she does something correctly, the furrow in her brow when she's trying to read the sheet music, the laugh she gives when Hannibal bumps her with his hip and motions for her to step aside.

There's a beauty in her freedom, her independence. The cage is an unavoidable circumstance, not an end goal. He'd never want her trapped behind glass, never want her stifled and stored away, kept weak, kept from growth, for the mere sake of safety.

Hannibal wants Abigail to be her own creation, her own monster, and find a skin she can wear with comfort and pride. He wants her to grow into herself, to find her confidence and place in the world. He wants her to live.

Hannibal doesn't want to desire her shackled and unable to leave, trapped in a fixed environment and left to stagnate for the satisfaction of some thoughtless, baser instinct. He doesn't want her as a songbird.

(But still the image beckons, the thought beckons, and the briery thoughts wind their way around his heart and squeeze.)

Another week and a half passes by uneventfully. A few lone killers, attempting to be serial. An opera, but the singer is rather lackluster, the company doubly so, paling in comparison to his 7 o'clock appointment each Wednesday.

He collects business cards, out of habit more than anything else. He doesn't kill, not yet, knowing anything involving organ removal will have Jack Crawford more guarded than normal, *sharper* than normal – and for all Will Graham is a noose, Hannibal has no interest in cutting himself on Jack's pointed justice.

Hannibal prides himself on his self-control, the knife's edge shared by hedonism and madness he balances on. The tightrope he navigates expertly, without falter or slip.

He's always been careful regarding his control. Careful to satisfy, but not glutton himself on his urges. Careful to delight, but not at unreasonable levels of risk.

Things change, as the third week since he'd woken with dark spots in his memory and nudity as his only shield against nature, shifts into the fourth.

His skin crawls and itches, insect tracks he knows he won't find reality in, in the days leading up to the weekend. Waves of goosebumps and stabbing sensations not unlike pinpricks, needles dragged along his skin, punctures made haphazardly; painful, but not enough to see a doctor. Not enough to worry.

The lights seem brighter, excruciatingly so, and he has to dim the ones in his office and home to not walk around with the constant white pain of a migraine pulsing in his temple. He wears sunglasses, and tells his patients it's for medical reasons.

He finds himself quick to anger, compared to the placidity he normally experiences with those around him. A particularly blithe woman with a boorish husband that is, quite

obviously, having an affair with her sister, comments on the dimmed lights and Hannibal's sunglasses with an air of judgment. She says something. He can't recall what. What he *can* recall is the scalpel slipping into his hand without his conscious choice, reaching for her neck when she turned to examine his books.

But, as a whole, manageable. He meditates. He wears his sunglasses. He slathers himself in lotions and oils and hot baths, until the seismic shifts of rupturing sensations calm enough to *not* make him want to claw himself open and let the blood overtake the shooting pains. It works, bridges the gap of Hannibal's control and the shortened temper, and that's all he needs, really, while he waits for this to settle. While he waits for comprehension, for explanation.

The world shifts on a Friday, skin itching beneath his tuxedo, lotions and essential oils proving increasingly useless, sunglasses against the dress code, petty irritations with everyone from the grocer to Alana Bloom leaving him in a soured state he doesn't delight in.

He's tiring of her companionship, their affair that has delved into the realm of tedious conflicts and time preferred apart. In the allure of other forms, other affairs, to some less subdued extent.

Alana Bloom is a beautiful woman, refined in manners, sharp in intellect. Kind and firm and wholly good in the way few people are. Hannibal doesn't love her, but he respects her. Despite her waning trust in him, the way she looks at him when he pretends to sleep, he *does* respect her a great deal.

Even though she's not at the opera performance with him, they are in some semblance of a relationship, even though their borders aren't cleanly defined, not open or closed but some interim between them. He wouldn't, generally speaking, have an affair with a stranger at the Opera while engaged in a more long-term arrangement with someone he considers a friend. It's not the type of man he is. For all his hedonistic tendencies, he does restrain himself in some key areas.

But, there's a roiling burn his skin crawls with; marrow-deep desires, curdling in the linings of his lungs, choked in the diverging branches of his bronchi. There's a roiling heat, and there's a beautiful man. He has eyes that remind Hannibal of the winter sky, flecks of light in a sea of darkness, and there's something arousing about it all, watching him watch Hannibal, sharing a flirtatious smile over the head of some shallow socialite, not offering a word beyond a shared heat conveyed with eyes.

(Hannibal's attraction isn't linked to gender. It's beauty that draws him in. Beautiful bodies, beautiful minds. In any and all forms, orthodox or other. He's never restrained himself in that respect, indulging in whimsy and affairs across Florence and Paris.

In Baltimore, he hasn't taken quite so many partners, nor does he partake in the whirlwind of sensuality and pleasure he'd spent much of his youth chasing, but he does seek pleasure. Affairs with whoever catches his eye or mouth. Pleasure in whatever forms beckon. This is

the closest to abstinence he's come, this-one woman affair, and even it is only for the benefit of the FBI and Alana's sensibilities.)

Hannibal's focus is unsteady for the first three acts, shaken by the crowd of bodies, the lights glinting off the opulent jewelry, the sound of rushing, pumping blood that might be his and might be someone else's, the curl of desire stitching itself into every conscious thought, made a nuisance by a failure to control it. *His* failure to control it. He shuts the thoughts down as they arise, clenched fingers and a lack of care for the operatic highs he normally delights in, but it persists, lingers like an aftertaste, like a parting note:

It feels shrill, raining over his skin, reverberating in his ears.

Someone presses against him, someone warm and hard, and he doesn't care so much for the who's and the why's when the shrillness calms, when the roaring fire eating at him settles to a simmer, when he meets a pair of eyes that could be every color and no color at all, and they're heady with desire.

(It's improper, generally speaking, to fuck during an intermission.

It's improper, generally speaking, to feel the sting of a wedding ring and not care.

It's improper, generally speaking, to lack discretion and shame.)

Hannibal slams the man into the bathroom stall door, uncaring of the scoff and rushed footsteps that answer it. Pretty petal lips part and moan, as he presses against the yielding body and drags his teeth across skin. There are distant, echoing pleas, circling some far away space in time, but Hannibal doesn't care to hear them, doesn't care to reward them.

There's no lube to be found, so he uses his mouth. Hannibal slips between the tight ring of muscle as this stranger squirms, fingers prying apart cheeks to make room as he curls his tongue this way or that, fingers prodding at the entrance, testing the yield and stretch, impatient and eager and so very very *hard.* He laps at it for a moment, wetting it for his cock, and the man's saying something more, eyes half-dazed and skin flushed with arousal, the air sparked with interest and precome.

Hannibal sees it, the ache dangling between this body's legs.

(He doesn't care.)

He can't cap the noise that escapes him, as he sheathes himself in this willing body, feels the metal-band adorned hand curl behind his neck and scratch at the skin.

Hannibal, normally a gentleman, doesn't give his partner the chance to adjust to his girth, the chance to settle, or find a pleasurable angle.

He's itching once more, broil to burn, fire alight –

The bathroom stall, as decadent as the rest of this building, trembles under the combined force of Hannibal's push and the stranger's pull. Hannibal jackhammers in and out, rutting into the tight heat without care for gentleness or pleasure or anything beyond this single-minded need to *fuck*. Primal and unpredictable, as the stranger draws him into a kiss full of teeth, shuddering and whispering Hannibal's name again, another plea, as Hannibal bottoms out and feels the curl of an orgasm stark-white at the back of his eyes–

He tastes blood, as he comes. Among a sea of white heat and a scratched itch, the stranger's bruised lips weep copper. Hannibal, despite himself, swipes his index finger along it, and tastes it once more.

Brown eyes blown wide, as Hannibal lets him go, slips out of him, and tucks himself away. He's indecent, and obvious.

Hannibal recognizes him, faintly, some friend of a friend, rather. Married to a woman. Closeted, he'd thought with amusement before. An actor. Some pretty piece of eye candy with big dreams only heterosexual appeal can offer.

They say nothing, looking at each other.

Hannibal's mouth quirks, amused, and he doesn't bother to hide his indecency as he slips from the bathroom to find his seat among the throngs of humming bodies.

The lights irritate less, blood doesn't quite pulse, and his skin no longer crawls.

Ignoring the prim whispers and curious looks, Hannibal settles into his chair quite comfortably, and lets the ebb and flow of the orchestra's gentle transition to the main character's desolate *aria* pull him out to sea.

It's a curious thing, memory.

There are teeth, sharp rows of scalpel points, canine and predatory. He feels them prick skin, leeching poison through contact.

There are eyes, yellow, glowing eyes. He feels them scan him, assess him, damning him with a mere glance to some fate unknown.

There is a voice, known and unknown, dancing just off the path of recollection like a winding trail of will-o-wisps he can't follow.

When he touches skin, the skin above his sternocleidomastoid, the skin that tasted poison and needle-point incisors as an embrace, there is no mark. When he looks in the dark, feeling seen and known in the worst sort of way, no glow finds him. When he listens, the will-o-wisps' fluorescence fades, further and further away from him.

Hannibal looks in the mirror, once.

He feels marked, but the only marks on him are those slashed across his wrists. Hung like a heretic, left to bleed.

He hasn't slept in days.

There are bruises baked into the creases of his skin, dark circles he can't hide with foundation alone, and his eyes carry secrets his mind's not to know.

Hannibal doesn't look in the mirror again.

He loses time, between calling an old business card for meat and the taste of flesh in his teeth.

Hannibal calls on an old offense, a crime Will might even agree worthy of the display – abusive father, terrifying his children into subservience in their family bakery. He'd visited years prior on recommendation from a colleague, but the bruises and wild eyes had caught his attention more than any of the spun-sugar his taste buds absorbed.

Hannibal doesn't need to drug him. The pig did it for him, stumbling down a desolate side-street far off the beaten path. It's a less than savory part of town. Anything could happen to him.

Unfortunately, *anything* happens to be the Chesapeake Ripper, tonight.

He takes the pig back to his house through the service tunnels, the man's weight surprisingly unburdensome. Hannibal's strong, true, but he'd expected it to be more difficult. It's almost easy.

(It's never this easy.)

It's here that the memory turns to static, something and everything overwriting it during the storage process. Stray sounds and scents, the familiar sight of gore.

Nothing is surgical, as his soul and mind slip back into his body, free from the streamline confusion and static. The neat cuts he finds around the kidneys and heart – bitter as it was sure to be – are obliterated. The abdominal cavity has been scratched apart, like a stray cat searching for meals in the rib cage of dead prey. There's skin between his teeth, bite marks

laid in scattered patterns across the ransacked carcass. When he checks his fingernails, there's tissue and blood caked under each one.

It isn't surgical – it is brutality; the primal sort of kill he'd only employed once, with Mischa's killers.

He looks in the cavity, and tracks the organs across his basement and teeth.

There's a true rib missing from the sternum, only the sprawling remnants of costal cartilage to show it had been there at all.

When he swallows, it splits him open from esophagus to intestines, like glass, like paper cuts over time.

Hannibal pretends it's a metaphor, and incinerates the body to erase the taste of marrow from his mouth. He pretends, and chokes on the copper pooling in his mouth and burning flesh fumes.

(There is no display. This is not the Ripper's kill. There is no art to be found here.)

"Dr. Lecter?" and it's Will's voice, waving an impatient hand in front of blurry vision.

Hannibal blinks, until reality is clear enough that the blue sea shifts back into eyes. Curious eyes, lethal and pointed at him. The jut of a fishhook, caught in his jaw. Hannibal should look away.

Hannibal can't look away.

"Will," he replies, guarded but warm. "I didn't expect you."

Will steps closer.

Hannibal doesn't let himself step back, but feels the impulse all the same.

"You're not sleeping," Will asserts, something foreign glinting in his eyes as he begins to reel the line in. "You *can't* sleep. There's something keeping you from sleeping."

"I sleep as necessary–"

"–you don't know *why* you're not sleeping either. You just can't. You feel restless."

Hannibal breathes in sharply, feels the drag of the stolen rib along his lungs as he breathes.

(He doesn't know if that's a metaphor, anymore.)

"I assure you, I'm perfectly fine."

It sounds defensive, even to his own ears. Hands shifting between pots on the stove, pretending he has half a clue what he's making, what he's been doing, like he'll taste anything other than raw meat that smells like bourbon, other than life-fluid that's not his own.

Will touches him, a blistering graze of skin on skin, the narrow strip not protected by his shirt collar or hair.

It sets him ablaze in the worst kind of way, a craving he can never satisfy, a resounding ache to know Will in every way, to have him and hold him and hide him away.

Those fingers feel like a brand, worse than teeth, searing his flesh in a way the world would see, a visceral burn he wouldn't be able to hide. He resents the implication, hand at the nape. He resents the emotions evoked.

He resents the way Will's shifted to mirroring him, the subconscious rhythm they're both falling into. He resents the ease with which he succumbs, the fact that part of him wants this past a point of self-preservation.

He resents.

He pulls Will's hand from his skin, and steps away.

The flames lick at him, coiled around his veins in a choke hold, begging him to reach out and touch, but he doesn't dare. He looks at the pots, and tells himself it's not hiding.

Will's quiet, watching him, still with that infernal intensity.

"You're hiding something."

"Don't we all hide things?"

"I thought we agreed to no more lies, Dr. Lecter."

"Agreement implies I had leverage in the discussion, negotiation rights. It was a preference, one put into place by you, not a contract of any sort."

"It was a boundary," Will counters.

"Boundaries are often traversed in the course of friendships."

"Is that what we have? Friendship?"

"What would you call it, Will?" Hannibal asks, busying himself with vegetables that need to be diced. The cut is a bit too blunt, the first time, the ringing call of impact echoing his kitchen. "How would you define us?"

“We evade definition, like the Chesapeake Ripper.”

“Long lost light, millions of years away,” Hannibal voices, barely audible. “Your obfuscation is impressive.”

“You haven’t been answering your phone.”

“I’ve had it off.”

“You’re *lying*,” Will hisses, indignant for reasons unknown.

Hannibal ignores it, ignores the closing proximity, and says,“So are you. Lies are what we are.”

Will opens his mouth, teeth white and beautiful, tongue pink and pointed–

He’s hungry, hungrier than he’s ever felt, running through the woods and snow.

He doesn’t feel the cold, not exactly, but is aware of it with every tread through snow banks, every puff of air materialized before him.

His teeth throb in his mouth, a life-pulse he’s chasing to food. To sustenance. To life.

An answer appears in the fields at night, in between beams of shifting moonlight. Were he to have a mirror, the scar on his throat would be visible and damning, but his focus is on the prey. The kill. The food.

There is no art to the animal kingdom, not on matters of survival and base urges. Bones snap beneath his limbs, crunching ribs between his teeth as the prey wriggles and screams in the cage of his maw.

His daughter would not call this murder. Nothing goes to waste.

He sups skin from bone, bone from body, and organs and linings from what remains. He’s hungry, the bottomless sort of hunger, matted with drying blood, ears ringing with offered screams.

(It looks black in the moonlight, the blood. Indistinguishable from the shape of Randall Tier’s gift, bestowed without warning.

Enjoy, it had teased. Beasts find much joy in destruction; Hannibal’s beast is no different.)

Hannibal is not as unfamiliar with nature's wildness as his countenance might lead one to believe, all too familiar with treading through all sorts of environments for his art, for his passions. In Lithuania, his father taught him how to hunt. In Paris, he taught himself.

This is not a hunt.

His knees shake as he pulls himself together, as he forces himself up, ignoring the various aches and pains in favor of the sunlight sneaking through the forest canopy, the slow creeping realization of what exactly the blackness his memory palace courts means.

There's gore coating his limbs like biblical water, viscera laced around his body like breadcrumbs. He can taste marrow and bone, on his tongue, in his throat, brushing against his lungs in warning and memory.

His hands are gift-wrapped evidence, tissue and waste raked from prey.

Enjoy, the note had said, had promised, had warned.

Something's broken, deep down inside.

He can't tell if it's in body or in mind, if it's the ricocheting impact of another lapse in control or if it's a consequence of crimes unknown. Sins now known.

Not art.

Not beauty.

Something different. Something horrific, even to his standards. Something monstrous and wrong and entirely cloaked in shadows and amnesia. Hannibal presses the heel of his palm to his eyes until the pounding of his head lessens, until firework sparks greet the lids of his eyes, and he can try to follow the lines of ruin and decay he's dressed himself in.

To follow the footprints to some source, to some scene, to some display he'll burn away in the incinerator, lock behind steel doors and glacial starvation along with all the other things his mind won't quite piece together. Fragments salvaged and stored and ignored.

Teacups and china, abandoned and forsaken. But destruction doesn't halt at mercy's call.

Hannibal should know better.

Hannibal should've known in wheat fields and isolation.

He hadn't. This won't stop.

This is happening to him. He is not *happening* of his conscious control.

The machinations and gears of the universe twist and turn, entropy continues, and Hannibal's hands have slipped from the wheel.

(The footprints disappear in a clearing not twenty feet away. Different prints replace them. Prints too large and too canine. Hannibal looks away, knowledge and ignorance tasting like chunks of meat in a bowl of broth. Pictures of fur and claws and inhuman teeth, of flesh and blood and bone consumed thoughtlessly, of primality over art, of control and his complete lack of it, flash through his mind rapidly. The knowledge is absorbed and processed and shuffled into place in the context of life and what he's become.

A pyrrhic victory, this understanding. There is no satisfaction to be found here.)

He kills three people on his journey back to Baltimore.

A hiker unlucky enough to stumble upon him. A delivery truck driver that stops to see what happened. A taxi driver that picked him up in stolen clothes smelling like death.

He disposes of evidence adequately, leaves no trace behind, and takes himself at the house on the bluff before Abigail's bewildered eyes.

"Are you okay?" she asks, scent tainted by acrid notes of fear as she trails after him through the house. Fear *for* him, his mind reasons, not *of* him. "Is that–"

"It's not mine," he says roughly, voice thick with accent and disuse. The last time he spoke was with Will, at his house. Burning and resenting and so completely and utterly confused. He doesn't have to check to know days have passed. Unaccounted hours, unaccounted deaths. Unknown words, unknown conversations.

He doesn't know what he's said to Will, what he could have revealed to him. What he's done, what he's–

"Who–"

"The details elude me, at present," he says, shirking off the borrowed t-shirt that reeks of artificial beef tallow and fatty oils and throwing it in the trash can.

"You don't remember?"

"Abigail," is his terse response, through tired teeth and the taste of rawness he can't explain, can't control, can't–

She stops beside him, biting her lip as she shifts in a state of worry. His hands clench around the kitchen counter until it hurts, cementing himself in this moment, grounding himself in things his mind can't conceal from him.

"What can I do?" Abigail whispers, sweet and citrusy as she touches his shoulder.

His darling daughter. *His* .

Something snarls, captive in the bars of his ribs, the palpitating walls of his heart and lungs, rattling for control.

(*Minemineminemine*)

Gentle as he can, he cups her hand, and resists the urge to crush and cage.

“I’ll be okay, my dear. A cup of tea would be lovely, if you don’t mind.”

He draws back from Abigail’s warmth, from his own inner hissing, towards the shower.

Her question stops him, death toll loudly echoing the small house on the bluff like a gunshot.

“Is it Will’s fault? Did Will do this?”

“I don’t know,” he admits, and that’s worse than the mystery of it all. The amnesia, the dissociation, the stolen flesh and breaking sensations creeping into his reality, overwhelming him, taking him under. The thing inside him. The thing *put* inside him…

Abigail’s blue eyes are shining, wet with things he’s never entirely understood.

“We’ll be okay, Hannibal. It’ll be okay.”

He lets her lie, for both their sakes.

Will Graham is nothing if not unpredictable, he recalls amid the drilling heat of shower water, watching as it swirls and swirls in pink rivets down the drain. Vengeful, craving control, plotting with Jack and luring Hannibal to some end neither of them know entirely.

Hannibal doesn’t know who’s responsible.

Hannibal doesn’t know if this is the end Will craves, if it’s his design.

Hannibal doesn’t know much beyond scars not there and sensations lacking lucidity.

(He lacks control. He wonders where it went.)

He drives the car into a body of water far from the bluff, swapping plates with another car to buy time.

He cooks Abigail dinner like nothing is wrong, listens to her play and offers praise at the progress she’s made. She is quiet, contemplative, when he isn’t prompting her for

conversation. There's a distinct delicateness they're both weighing their words with. Measured melodies he hates, but indulges in for her sake. For his sake.

It feels like suffocation, but he's grown used to drowning, and this is no different.

"I have this memory," Margot Verger says with a wave of her hand, rolling her eyes at her own tone. "Mason's standing over my bed. Not speaking, not blinking, just watching. I asked him what he wanted, and he wouldn't speak. His eyes felt like a brand, even when I rolled over and pretended to sleep. I still feel like he's watching me every time I sleep. Waiting."

"Waiting for what?" Hannibal prompts, crossing his legs with elegance as he leans back in his chair across from her.

Her sad eyes are almost translucent, staring into his. Bogged down by the ghosts of her past, haunted and driven to wildness. He waits, as the words brim in her mouth, for the precise moment she chooses to spill them.

"For Mason's needs to be *satisfied*," is the bitter, melodic reply. She crosses her arms over her chest, settling into the chair. "Lollipops aren't the only things he takes from children."

"You allow Mason to hold power over you. In your fear, your distress, you arouse interest. Control. Power. These are the desires Mason satisfies, watching you sleep. Forcing you to witness his various cruelties."

"Control…" Margot gives a husky laugh, lips twisting in a mockery of a smile. "Of all the things the Verger fortune has afforded me, control has not been one of them."

"Opportunity is present. Your brother won't offer you control. He'll say he will, until the moment he snatches it away."

She breaks his gaze, looking at her hands.

When a beat passes and she's still said nothing, he leans forward, watching her keenly with interlocked fingers: the picture of professional interest.

"You know you will have to kill him, Margot. You've known it for years."

"Poor planning," she murmurs.

"You failed to murder your brother because you still love him. In love, you take leave of your senses, but in hatred, you must be present to calculate your actions. Allow yourself to hate him."

Margot absorbs this, translucent eyes blinking slowly.

“Do you think Mason will just give you what you want?”

Margot’s head bows, something complicated straining her elegant features.

“You’ll be begging him for the rest of your life. Did begging help when he tortured you?”

“I’m lucky I didn’t kill him,” she interjects, a ring of gallows humor to her voice. “Papa’s will was very clear. Upon the passing of his beloved son Mason, in the absence of a legitimate male heir, the sole beneficiary shall be the Southern Baptist Convention.”

“Even in death, Mason would take everything from you.”

She nods, slowly, nails digging into flesh.

Hannibal looks at her carefully, taking in the fading scent of her tepid fear, the sight of her slow burn anger she’s constructing into fuel for what she’ll need to accomplish. There’s a desperation to her he’s learning, week by week.

One he’d like to help, rather than hinder.

“One of the most powerful forces that shapes us as human beings is the desire to leave a legacy,” he offers, casual as can be. Her salvation, should she act on it. “What legacy would you leave behind?”

“I don’t get a legacy,” she counters, but the gears are spinning. Power, at her fingertips, in her blood. The biological kind.

“Unless you make one.”

The idea is weighed against the risk, marinating in her own commendable self-preservation instinct. There should be some semblance of pride, seeing his tender ministrations manifest in this way, but it is hollow. Empty.

Entertainment, but the shallow sort that fades as soon as it leaves his sight.

There’s a very real element of fear he can feel, for Margot and himself. Vulnerability, and the cruel response it evokes in the world.

(Revolting, he thinks, to feel so human. He wonders if Margot had thought so too, the first time Mason stripped wealth and privilege from her under his blunt-force brutality.)

The tabloids publish the article after Margot leaves, signaled by the flood of emails from colleagues and friendly acquaintances. Hannibal’s not surprised when he arrives home to find Alana’s car idling in his driveway, her eyes narrowing on him the moment he steps out of his Bentley.

She’s wearing red lipstick when she steps out, toned legs clad in practical boots she pairs with one of her floral dresses.

Hannibal doesn’t kiss her cheek the way he normally would, doesn’t step into her space or offer an embrace.

Her eyes are slate, looking at him, and there’s an undercurrent of hurt he doesn’t enjoy being the cause of. Not beyond typical sadism.

“I would’ve preferred to be told in person,” Alana says curtly, “rather than over the phone by *Freddie Lounds* .”

“Apologies.”

“Are you sorry it happened,” she presses, “or that you were caught?”

“We’ve made no promises to each other, Alana,” Hannibal replies gently, “I apologize for not communicating with you and ensuring that understanding was mutual. I also apologize for having you find out like this, instead of telling you myself.”

“It’s rude Hannibal. I thought…” Alana bites her lip, looking up at him through her lashes. A few stray tears cling to the curls like mascara, but they don’t spill. “I thought there was potential between us. More than funeral sex.”

Hannibal looks away. Her blue eyes aren’t enticing. Her stagnant tears aren’t striking. The gentle flush of pink spread across her cheeks isn’t one he wants to trace in pencil and musical notes. The shape of her love isn’t one that can fit against his, no matter how he breaks it down with chisels and slabs of marble.

It would be easier, perhaps, if he could enjoy her the way he has been. More convenient.

But there’s no evoked heat, when he cups her cheek. There’s no itch to seal their lips, no siren call to slip between her legs and fuck her.

Whatever has slipped between his ribs doesn’t crave her. It calls for something different.

“I value your friendship very deeply, Alana, and I never meant to disrespect you in any way.”

“But this isn’t working,” she completes for him.

He nods, slowly, and wipes a stray tear as it trails down her cheek.

“It’s…It probably would’ve happened sooner,” she says with a bitter laugh, “if it was meant to be.”

“Perhaps.”

Alana sighs, and wipes her eyes with the back of her hand. She pulls from his touch, and fixes him with a steely gaze.

“I know, Hannibal, how you look at him.”

Hannibal opens his mouth, and she raises a hand.

“Don’t deny it. I’m not blind. I see how you look at Will. How you feel for him. It bleeds out of you, I tried denying it for so long, but it’s impossible not to see. It’s part of why I didn’t want him to go back into therapy with you.”

“Will is a dear friend, Alana.”

She smiles, eyes shining with something ineffable. A fractured realization he wasn’t aware she’d been building.

“You really believe that. I’d think a psychiatrist would be more self-aware.”

“What exactly am I being accused of?”

“It’s not an accusation. I don’t require an admission. I know. That’s enough. It’s an ethical violation, Hannibal. You can’t let it go where your heart demands it go.”

“I don’t–”

She cuts him off with a kiss, gentle and sweet to his lips. It tastes like pity, as she pulls back. It tastes wrong.

“You will. You’ll see. I wish…I wish you could’ve loved me, but I’m not quite right. We’re not quite right for each other.”

“I hold you in the highest esteem,” he tells her honestly.

“Not quite the highest,” she remarks, “but close to it. Boundaries are important, Hannibal, not just for the patient. Remember that.”

He tracks the marks in his ceiling mirror, cuts and scars that were absent two months ago, absent a month ago, absent days ago.

In the light of the full moon, he received judgment.

His fingers touch the place along his neck where he feels teeth, the unmarred skin.

Hannibal feels nothing, but in the twisting beams of moonlight, he can see the faint outline of a bite like a brand, one too big to be human.

“Your therapy was successful,” Randall Tier tells him, wild and primal and self-actualized in a way Hannibal admires. “I am whole.”

“It’s a rewarding thing, to see the fruit of one’s labor,” Hannibal replies, clasping a hand on his shoulder. “What fruit have you borne, Randall?”

“Why tell when I can show?”

Smoke swirls, the autumnal crunch of leaves beneath his boots, a boat on the sea in his periphery .

Teeth, big white teeth, smiling and growling and too big to be human.

“A pack of one gets lonely, Dr. Lecter,” *whispered in his ear, wet and hot.* “Let me return your gift of peace.”

Enjoy.

Enjoy.

Enjoy.

(Hannibal cuts himself on his teeth and Randall Tier’s, and watches the blood drain away.)

“Do you still see my body in place of Randall Tier’s, when melatonin and moonlight aide your journey to the kingdom of Morpheus?”

Will’s fingers clench and unclench, settling around the armchair in a concerted effort.

“On some nights. On others I still see him, broken and human, under the impact of my fists.”

Hannibal hums, shifting slightly to mask his own arousal.

“In death, you offered elevation. The moments before it, you dragged him down to the dredges of mortality and humanity from his predatory status.”

“I offered the reality of his situation,” Will says, tongue loose around the words, appreciative as he stares into Hannibal’s gaze with eyes that could kill. “A grounding exercise.”

“Did you find yourself untethered, killing him?”

Will laughs, an aftertaste of bitterness coloring his features.

“My tether was you,” he muses, siren-sweet. “Your blood. Your death. Your betrayal.”

Hannibal swallows, near audible, and wets his lips with the tip of his tongue. Will mirrors him, attractive beyond measure, with the irresistible gravity of the sun and stars, and the tremor pulse of desire eats at him.

Flames and destruction…

He should have fucked that man last night, when he'd had the chance. To take the edge off, if for nothing else. Will's too clever, too tempting, too much for it to possibly be advisable. Any extension of connection beyond frayed friendships and intellectual companionship.

"In the ashes of history, there's a little known sect of the Greek Pantheon. Orphism, as it is called, is a faith rooted in the belief of moral cleansing by deaths. Suffering is divine, that of the gods doubly so. Orphic teachings tell us Dionysus was once Zagreus, a child of Zeus and Perspehone, murdered and dismembered by the Titans. The remnants of his soul, coated in his killers' ashes, was bound and divided: ψυχή and σῶμα. Ten deaths and ten resurrections were the price of purity. Paid in blood, not ichor."

Will's smile is dark, blood and moonlight reflected in shining white.

"Salvation by willing death seems more Abrahamic than Hellinistic."

"Much of Orphism was lost, in waves of war and impermanence. We have no way of ascertaining the willingness of the lives lost for Zagreus' soul, birthed in the form of Dionysus."

"The unwitting shedding of the body for the sanitization of the mind and soul. Was that your intention, when you left my mind to burn?"

Hannibal scoffs.

"Hardly. My preference lies with the dead divisions of the Dionysian Mysteries; the Maenads' blood thirst and fantastical prayer through a medium of life, death, and intoxication.

"Hedonistic values."

"Denials and decrying of flesh and bone as inherently damned is foolhardy and simplistic. We become of or from our environment. Our genetic blueprint imparts us with traits, our upbringing with impressions, our mind with our morals. Abstinence is not redemption, nor is enjoyment perdition."

"Death of body, death of mind. All that leaves is the divine spark we call a soul."

"Salvation in suffering. Orphic teachings share many parallels with that of Abrahamic faith. Another version told by a Christian author tells the tale as one of gluttony – murder and cannibalism – leaving a heart alone to repent in future lives for forgiveness."

"Does forgiveness come at your dinner table?" Will asks, the proverbial bullet between his teeth, waiting for the primer's spark.

Hannibal smiles at the scent of sulfur.

“Pain is a catalyst for change. We evolve from it, to escape more of it. It is inherently selfish. A delight we can turn to pleasure. Animals are limited, their consumption neither cruel nor kind at my table and by my knife. They do not experience religion, so they do not beget forgiveness in suffering. They do not change in their pain.”

“We all experience religion. Be it that of God or nature. Are you hoping to evolve in your pain?”

The click of the firing pin is a sound he won’t hear until later, the vibrato of the frenulum as the coiled words prepare for detonation.

Hannibal blinks, momentarily caught off guard.

“What pain are you referring to?”

Will’s eyes narrow.

“I told you I don’t appreciate lies.”

“As it so happens,” Hannibal retorts with a flicker of irritation, “I am not being deliberately mendacious. I am unaware of any pain I am supposedly experiencing.”

Will’s hostility sharpens, as he leans forward in his chair, close enough for his face to be inches from Hannibal’s own, when he mirrors the motion out of caution.

He can’t quite decipher the hungry look in Will’s eyes; blood lust and arousal look and smell the same from his vicious boy.

Will brushes Hannibal’s forehead with the back of his hand, and it does not feel like a strike.

“You don’t remember,” he murmurs. Then, louder: “how long have you been losing time?”

“I haven’t been.”

“Lie,” Will says, hand trailing down Hannibal’s cheek while the other slips to his thigh, holding him in place. “I can see it in your eyes.”

Hannibal betrays himself in a shiver under Will’s examination, feeling like a body in chalk at the scene of a crime.

“Loss of time, feverish heat, abnormal sleep patterns, altered behavior…”

“There is no pain. There is no issue.”

Will’s fingers slide to his nape, and he feels fire meet the touch, scalding blood welling to the surface without finding escape.

(He wonders, for a split second, if bloodletting would remove desire from his being as the Greeks thought it removed all taint and rot. If leaking it on the Earth would cleanse him of Randall's gift that he'd never wanted.)

"Lie," Will repeats, somehow closer than before, hair's breadth away.

Hannibal does not move, caught in rapture.

Hannibal tastes the bullet when Will slots their mouths together; an Orphic note trailing after him into oblivion that'll haunt his Memory Palace for all his years.

Hannibal finds avoiding Will Graham to be easy.

Their paths cross often at Hannibal's behest, at Hannibal's invitations and at his offerings to the FBI and Jack despite the risks. Will, on his own, rarely reaches out. Preferring the solitude of his own company.

Doubling down on his patients, booking himself from sunrise to sunset with social commitments and hobbies allows for reasons. Operas, art shows, society appearances, conferences. He finds excuses and weaves them into distance for him to regroup.

For him to find control. For him to understand and alter the reality of his situation, no matter mind musings and phantom bite marks from the dead.

(the lights still sting, the noises still stifle, the scents offend, the fire burns and burns and burns, but he's no slave to instinct and desire.)

Outside their weekly appointments, one of which was conveniently canceled due to a surfaced corpse that may-or-may-not have been an alias of the Ripper's work, they have no reason to see each other. Not that this stops such a meeting, when Margot enters her office cradling her stomach and its blooming bundle of cells he can smell, and says the father is Will.

Because, as is often the case with Will, *of course it is the exact opposite of what Hannibal would want*.

He spends the entirety of the session on edge, heart hammering in the confines of his rib cage in rage, that simple song of *minemineminemine* turned into a chorus of screams as he looks at Will, as he pictures Will with Margot, as the reality of his desire is realized in context.

(Betrayal, a lover's scorn, the taint of it in every tremor Hannibal doesn't meant to give, every jagged shard of imagination stabbed into him, the way every bone in his body rattles in a death toll, and he can't help but crave Margot's body and blood by scalpel.)

I see the way you look at Will Alana had said.

It wasn't supposed to be more than intellectual desire, yet he's hurt, yet he's wounded, yet his beast is crying for blood and cages once more, wishing to hide away Will with Abigail, free of the sight and mind and touch of others. His beast snarls and shakes its own confines, teeth itching to mark, to cut in turn the way its been cut.

To mark Will.

The entirety of the meeting, he does not meet Will's eyes. Will never looks anywhere but him, something satisfied in the landscape of put-on expressions that Hannibal does not want to decipher.

Something he does not wish to remember.

You'll see, Alana had said. Warned. Prophesied.

Hannibal sees, and wishes for blindness.

It's easy enough, manipulating Mason to solve the problem for him. He doesn't wish the pain of it on Margot, but it's the cleaner solution than what part of him wants. It's kinder than the fate she'd find at his scalpel for meddling in things she ought to know better than meddling in. For taking what is his for her own.

(*Minemineminemine,* the voice cries.

Shut up, he tells it in a snarl.)

He drowns the minute echoes of guilt in well-aged wine and another faceless body at a tedious event. They fuck in the bathroom stalls, Hannibal angling himself in a way that makes the person scream.

He doesn't check for a ring, because it's not a thing for him to care about. Commitment, love, fidelity…hollow concepts without meaning.

They're not his to behold, nor his to speculate over.

Stolen kisses disabused of intimacy and potential meanings, hope seen and discarded in the same instant.

(Will Graham was never his to have or lose.)

The second appointment he cancels twenty-four hours in advance, citing an unseen illness.

He watches from the comforts of another affair's hotel room as Will's face shines in the light of his front door camera. Confused, and a bit lost.

He reads his name on Will's lips, and stops looking.

"Have you slept?" Abigail asks when she sees him, kind enough to not stare at the bruising.

"I have rested."

She tilts her head.

"That's not an answer."

"So it isn't."

"Did you ask Will? Do you know what's happening to you?"

Hannibal's lip curls, and he looks down at the cup of tea Abigail's made him on instinct, letting the floral fumes soothe and irritate him simultaneously.

"Will's been finding new ties, recently. I've taken a step back from our professional relationship."

"What? I thought the plan was to get him close enough to trust, take him with us."

"Plans change, Abigail. I'm no longer certain he can be trustworthy."

She worries her lip, resting a hand on his.

"I trust you," she says.

Simple, sweet. It aches like a never-healing bruise. Tender, as her skin soothes him, scratches the crawling irritation of his broiling skin.

Minemineminemine.

He lifts her hand, and kisses her knuckles.

"Don't worry, my dear. We'll be free regardless of Will."

As he prepares to leave, she stops him, fingers at his wrist. She pulls him into a hug, squeezing tight as she can, and it feels like a vice grip around his heart – a comfort lost to

time.

Pack comforts, he can't help thinking.

No one has hugged him honestly since Mischa.

"Be careful," she murmurs into his chest. "Don't let him take advantage of your blindspot and affection."

"Do you think I would?"

"I think you might, if it's clever enough."

"For both our sakes, I'll endeavor to be cautious where Will Graham is concerned."

"Promise me."

"I promise, darling."

(It feels like a vow, and it's one he doesn't yet know he'll break.)

Will leaves a single voicemail, after Hannibal cancels another session with murder and doesn't reschedule.

"*Was it something I did? After…after everything, after what happened…I thought it was different. I thought we were done with the mindfuck games. I thought we were even, with Margot and Mason and everything else. I thought you… Call me when you decide to make time for me, Dr. Lecter.*"

It's easy, deleting the message, because Hannibal's not hostage to the beast in his blood, curdling his desires into something untamable, something tainted, something unholy.

(and if Hannibal has to bite the men he fucks to keep from crying out a different name, that's not something that will ever be known to anyone else.)

Hannibal doesn't deprive himself of relief for the sake of control, this time.

He fucks every man that's willing, when the burning desire eats at him. He soothes himself with Abigail's scent and safety. He grounds himself in cooking and killing. He takes more than he normally does of bodies, burning the rest of the evidence rather than displaying it.

He wears sunglasses indoors, stylish ones, and no one says a word because they know better. His reputation settles and slander never sticks, as is often the case with those wealthy and charming enough to acquire influence from friendships, and if a few more closeted men are outed for their indiscretions, it's no fault of his.

He indulges every instinct and impulse to a near reckless extent, and he does not look at Will Graham.

(Not even when he'd found himself hanging from Mason's rafters, bound in a makeshift straight jacket, had he met Will's gaze. When Will cut him free, he left him unconscious at the scene, drugged Mason to the point of vulnerability, and paralyzed him without Will's participation or observation.

He did not stay. He did not wait. He did not answer Will's phone call.)

In the shifting sea of shades and unreality, the shapes and shadows his mind forgets are faceless. Flickering beings in a Tenebristic haze, dances of violence on a canvas of flesh and teeth. They have no eyes and no skin, innards outward for his own consumption.

His own delight, despite an inability to recall that delight in its entirety.

Flickers of ship-on-the-bottle and wet dog and musk sift through his memories, gentle murmurs and wide eyes, but Hannibal's awareness and perception have become ineffably unreliable. He can't trust; not Will, not his memory.

(Will's kindness, like love, like fidelity, like commitment, aren't things for him to know, for him to understand. They never were, and never will be. Bullets and sulfur and ears and daughter-deaths and lies.

Some teacups are beyond repair, and some honeypots can't be reformed.)

When the full moon encroaches, Hannibal locks himself in his basement with meat and chains, but doesn't expect them to hold him.

And they don't, they never would, never will: teeth and claws and things sharper enough to cut steel. Strength, inhuman and coiled in corded muscle he doesn't have normally. Instincts, feral and whetted by bloodlust and unfettered impulse.

Hannibal knows this, as the voice in his fractured recollection settles into Randall's soft-spoken confidence. As it is understood and contextualized. As he understands what he's been gifted, and what the cost was.

The taste of bone marrow and the smooth slide of blood down his throat is familiar. Raw flesh and splintered bones, borrowed ribs and all. He remembers parts of it with a more grounded clarity, and he doesn't allow the residual discomfort to show.

When he wakes in distant fields covered in evidence the FBI will never find a body for, he can almost hear Randall's voice lower to a whisper, can almost feel his breath ghost over Hannibal's neck as he prepares to bite:

It'll be beautiful. I'll show you how beautiful it is.

"You look like shit," is Will's greeting message from his desk chair, gun cocked somewhat lazily, presumably as a warning and deterrent.

Evidently, three canceled appointments, five ignored calls, and two ignored voicemails was where he broke in patience. He hadn't even allowed Hannibal time to craft a new path of excuses and plausible deniability. Almost rude.

"How kind," Hannibal replies dryly, giving Will a wide berth as he reviews his patient notes for today's sessions. "I presume you're here for a case?"

"Yeah. The case of why the fuck aren't you answering my calls, and why the fuck are you avoiding me now?"

"I should think you'd be grateful, if I were doing such a thing. Surely it must be easier to not be in the company of one you profess to hate."

"We both know it's not that simple," Will says, whisky-smooth. "Don't we, Dr. Lecter?"

Hannibal thinks of Abigail's arms wrapped around him, murmuring in his chest about being careful. Will Graham is volatile, an infectious recklessness that has already upset the careful balance that allows him the luxuries he has. Will inspires things Hannibal should not indulge in, should have learned better than to allow with all of Greek Mythology carved in marble warnings and caution tape.

Love in Medea. Pride in Tantalus. Trust in Icarus.

Hannibal's beast aches, reaching with claws and teeth, and he can't entirely silence it, for all he tries.

“An unfortunate series of events, I believe. Cases and a lone case of illness.”

“I saw you in the corpses,” Will says, lips slanted in a half-smile. “Not gift-wrapped, but a message nonetheless.”

“Messages are often misinterpreted by the recipient, words and intent lost in translation. The medium of flesh is less clean and precise than that of pen and paper, or letters on a screen. Tell me, what did you divine from what was left? The blood stained parcels?”

Will kicks his feet off the desk and stands. The gun hasn’t left his hand, as he strides for Hannibal.

Hannibal doesn’t move when Will gets closer, too close, curiosity and a feverish heat holding him captive.

The magnetism he feels compels him closer, begs him to touch, to taste, to savor, to mark. Hannibal does none of these, watching Will’s pupils dilate.

“Abstinence and ascetic values,” Will murmurs, stroking the bone of Hannibal’s jaw with the cold metal barrel. Hannibal’s eyes flicker to the safety catch. It isn’t latched, trigger easy to pull, lead bullets loaded and damning as silver would be. Abigail would be very disappointed in him, were she able to witness this. Unfortunately, that’s not enough. “Tamed or caged by you, I wonder.”

Hannibal shivers, as the chill seeps into skin, a satisfaction the string of discarded affairs hadn’t quite accomplished, Will’s gaze incendiary, the proxy-touch euphoric.

(*Minemineminemineminemine,* the rattling heart cries. It echoes, and Hannibal does not try to silence it.)

“Balance is important in all walks of life,” is his reply, tongue slowed by mirrored desire, spiraling from axon to synapse, from photoreceptor to mirror neuron, from endocrinological responses to olfactory receptors. Desires seen and processed, scented and interpreted, and the gap between them feels as though it’s closing, world axis tilting. His mind spins with thoughts, origin and destination vague and unknown. Merged, intertwined, unextractable from the inches between them as Will hovers, gun against cheek. “Even the most primal sects of Dionysus spent time hunting and gathering, building and moving, despite their entrancement by psychoactive substances and drunken fornication.”

“Cold-turkey quitting is damning for most. Did you find agony in withdrawal, or clarity?”

“Is this an addiction?”

Will’s smirk is edged like a blade – a promise Hannibal shouldn’t want to taste – as his hand pulls apart the dress shirt and suit, slipping beneath the thick fabrics to feel for a pulse. It’s pounding, rattling in an escape attempt, eager to leap into Will’s cruel hands.

“Your hearts racing, *docter*,” he murmurs, trailing the gun down the expanse of revealed skin to point at Hannibal’s heart. Lips a hair's width away, intoxication overwhelming, he barely

hears Will's final remark. "What facts can we *divine* from your flesh?"

Whatever answer Hannibal could have provided, a half-formed soliloquy he'd give in place of truth – not lies, not truth, some gray midpoint acceptable and mutual to both of them – is drowned by Will's mouth crushing his, gun prodding the space between his chest and ribs.

Will's other hand curls in his hair, tugging enough for white pain to greet closed eyelids. Their teeth nearly clack with the force Will demands – crash and collision – and there's no mercy to be found in the way he tastes, the way he smells closer, the way that godforsaken aftershave permeates the drunken haze of viscous desire and only hastens the slow-broil of Hannibal's blood, the cry for *moremoremore* . There's no mercy in the way Will's clever tongue slips into Hannibal's mouth, rocking into him roughly with metal and skin and fabric. Hannibal's lost in it, lost in Will, and he can taste the satisfaction as it curls in Will's beautiful, devious mind.

Hannibal breaks from Will's mouth for the skin of his neck, teeth aching to taste and drive noises from that lovely throat, but Will's gun is quick to replace skin.

Half-lidded eyes look up at him lazily, gun poking his throat, and they're both painfully hard.

"Open up," Will orders, and Hannibal does so without conscious thought. He doesn't think Will plans to kill him with it, not when his hands would more than suffice. This is nothing more than scare tactics and power plays. Were he a normal person, it might have worked. But he enjoys Will's control almost as much as he despises his complete lack of it.

The taste is unpleasant. The unfortunate reality of his pallet is awful things taste that much worse, dust and lead and sulfur sharp and odorous, offensive as the components seep into his gustatory receptors. They don't cut into his arousal, nor the tenebrous haze enclosing his mind. Reality and fear are far-off concepts; they do not reach him, do not interrupt the gravity, as his pulse steadies and the rattling – for the first time since it began – stops.

Will's hand cups his jaw as he pushes it further, past lines of teeth and tongue until it can go no further, until Hannibal's eyes water at the feeling. He doesn't gag. That reflex had been lost in a whirlwind in Florence, when he first learned desire as a manipulation tactic.

"You're so good at this," Will says in a way that suggests fondness. "I knew you would be. I don't have to read it in your body language when it's clear from all the whores you fucked scattered across the tabloids."

Sharp acidity joins arousal's scent. Jealousy.

Hannibal's lips smile around the gun, even as Will drags it along his tongue slowly – probably knowing exactly the complaints Hannibal's tastebuds offer his mind – pumping it in and out of his mouth like the proxy cock it is.

When he thrusts it in hard, without warning, Hannibal chokes, and Will's eyes shine.

The gun is removed, and Will flicks the safety back on before tucking it in the holster.

“If you want something different, next time, don’t run off without a word like a coward, and don’t fuck your way across Maryland to chase a high you’re not going to get.”

Will’s hand slides over the bulge in Hannibal’s suit pants, squeezing enough for Hannibal to groan.

“Bet you wish I’d touch you more,” Will whispers against the shell of his ear, sending a cold shiver down his spine as his skin settles and calms the flames once more.

Will’s teeth meet Hannibal’s skin where the bite scar exists between flickering beams of moonlight, and they cut sharper than memory ever had. Blood weeps from the wound in rivers, but Hannibal doesn’t attempt to halt the flow.

“Next time, Hannibal,” is the murmured promise, before his villainous thing pulls away.

Branded and marked as Will’s, the beast settles. Simpers, pathetic and desperate and things Hannibal supposes he is as well.

(Hannibal doesn’t move from the wall for close to an hour, mind trapped in the temptation of Will’s mouth curling around his name. He wonders what it would take for him to say it again.)

“You fucked him,” Abigail blurts that weekend, blunt and delightful as ever. “Didn’t you?”

Hannibal reaches up, feeling for the scarf he’d intended to wrap around the wound, and finds it absent. He can’t say he’s entirely upset at it, pleasure twisted and tangled at the mark Will’s mouth imparted.

“No,” he says.

“Liar.”

“Have you been practicing your Italian?”

Abigail rolls her eyes in a way he’d kill any other young woman for. From Abigail, it’s a show of trust, precious, and heavy with implication.

“No, I’ve been focusing on that piece I stumbled over last time. Changing the subject won’t make me forget, y’know. Does this mean Will is still part of the plan? He’s not the reason for your…state a few weeks ago?”

“That has yet to be determined,” Hannibal says.

Abigail’s eyes whet on the uncertainty, mistrust wrapped in perfect posture under his steady watch.

“How do you know he’s not sleeping with you in hopes of regaining your confidence, or as a way to let loose some tension? There aren’t many lesbians that want to sleep with a man, after all.”

“I know it the same way he knows he’s not on my rolodex.”

“So…not at all?”

“With absolute certainty and absolute doubt.”

“I think that you and Will both delight in a language of purple prose to escape any sort of honesty that might otherwise be achieved.”

“Abigail.”

Abigail straightens her spine at the tone, knowing when to drop it without the request being verbalized.

“Show me how you’ve improved, my dear. I’m eager to see it for myself.”

Later, her fingers dance across the keys with a grace reminiscent of his own. Love, piercing and sticky, finds its way in his throat and chest; a hemorrhaging sensation not unlike dismemberment.

(How many deaths, he wonders, until love finds a grave in his Memory Palace, as Zagreus found in the sacred grounds of Delphi.)

The ghost of the older wound does not flicker, does not shine, does not show in beams of dancing moonlight. The brand succumbs to the newer claim.

Hannibal touches it, and it burns like frostbite.

Freddie Lounds dies outside of his control, Will’s eyes sparkling and malevolent in Jack Crawford’s office, looking at him with private amusement. Alana’s narrowed eyes dart between them with suspicion, and her hurt is a palpable wound when her gaze crosses Hannibal’s. All is not forgiven, it would seem.

Will sees this, processing it before Hannibal's eyes. Smugness curls in the wrinkles of his face, something only shown to Hannibal.

Hannibal focuses back on Jack's words.

"Why were you granting interviews to Freddie Lounds?" he demands, an accusatory ring to his words.

"I live in the middle of nowhere, Jack. If someone wanted to take her, it's…" Will pauses, brow wrinkling in faux contemplation. "...not a bad place to do it."

Jack and Alana exchange a look, Jack in particular looking ruffled, and they say nothing.

"I provide the ingredients," Will says, unpacking a cooler in Hannibal's kitchen and still smug. "You tell me what we should do with them."

"What's the meat?"

Will slides it across the counter with a smirk.

"What do you think?"

Hannibal unwraps the butcher paper and twine, examining the cut of meat with a critical eye.

"Veal?" he guesses, before smelling it more carefully. "Pork, perhaps?"

"She was a slim and delicate pig," Will says, glancing at the ingredients he's scattered about.

Hannibal freezes for a moment, feeling every palpitation of his heart with an uncomfortable awareness. Blood calling to blood, aching to touch, to taste, to *own*.

He shakes it off, and smiles, forcing the flush rising in his cheeks to settle.

"I'll make you lomo saltado," he says warmly. "We'll make it together."

Hannibal offers Will the knife's handle, unable to let the pun go.

"You slice the ginger."

Will smiles as their eyes meet, taking the blade from Hannibal's hand, and Hannibal wants to rip him apart and hold him together, wants to know him and have him in every way one can a person, wants to lock him away from the world with Abigail, because they're *his* .

Will looks in Hannibal's eyes with lust and bloodthirst swirling in those depths, and Hannibal drowns.

“Take me to bed,” Will orders, plied with wine and whiskey, the food they made together, the satisfaction of another kill. He’s sitting on the arm of Hannibal’s leather chair, outline flush against outline, layers of clothes a tedious barrier.

Hannibal smiles, and tracks the fire as it reflects in Will’s eyes, the curling flames in shifting irises, the flecks of gold burning in his pupil. Hannibal presses into the sweet loss of Will’s lips, hands curling in the fabric of his shirt as they fall together like collapsing stars.

Every languid slide is wet and wanting, the dark heat of their approaching union bearing down on them, evident in the frenetic beat of their pulses, the spiraling satisfaction as Will pulls him up, not breaking their kiss.

The claws in his suit, ripping cloth from skin, both stripping nude as they walk backwards.

Will’s setting the pace, Hannibal’s gentle glide transitioned into the claiming bite of Will’s, the crush of mouths enough to make dust of brittle bones, both gasping and bleeding, licking their way into each other. Will pushes Hannibal onto the bed, something from scripture as Hannibal licks his lips and watches Will do the same.

“I want to feel you for days,” he says, the Devil’s purr in his rumbling vibrato on Hannibal’s throat. He presses his cock against Hannibals, intertwining their beings together from mouths to ankles, and he rocks enough for a sharp jerk of air to slip free.

Hannibal fists his hands in Will’s Boticelli curls and presses them together once more, swirling the taste of Will in his mouth like aerated wine, rolling his hips as Will ruts above him. The scent of sex floods the room, and it will linger for days at least. Hannibal wants it to linger for years, to drown himself in this scent of their coupling, to bottle it and bathe in it.

“Will…” he murmurs, watching Will sit up with a smirk and cocked brow, hand around the width of Hannibal’s cock like a gun. “You need… *lube...*”

Will slides around Hannibal’s girth without pause, white teeth biting that smirking mouth as Hannibal sinks in, in, in, to the heat of Will’s body, merging and tangling together inextricably. Hannibal shifts his hips until Will’s eyes roll up and he presses back down into the intrusion.

“You’re beautiful,” he tells Will.

It’s a copper confession, and he tastes his blood between the joining of their mouths as Will shuts him up. Will experiments with him as much as he pleases, alternating pace anytime he thinks Hannibal is too close to release. Wicked cruelty in his eyes, as he bites the mark he’d left enough to draw blood again, dips his fingers in the weeping wound and trails it over their bodies like tattoo ink.

The crescendo comes when he flips their positions, Will beneath him, and slams himself in and out of Will without care for gentleness or patience. Nails dig in his back, nips and sucking bruises trailed over his skin to hide the noises Will can't suppress or stop.

(The beast is quiet, as Will slumps next to him in a disarray, as they seek each other's warmth and their puzzle pieces align perfectly, for one moonbeam moment. The beast is quiet. A gift Hannibal can't help but enjoy.)

Hannibal looks in the bathroom mirror, later. Face flushed, hair in a disarray, bites and blood scattered across his skin for Will's pleasure. He looks distinctly touched, affected, the way he leaves his partners before slipping away with a smooth smile. He looks different, beyond the sharp teeth. He looks changed.

His eyes are gold, maroon cracks weaved through a Midas touch he doesn't understand.

He closes his eyes, and love bleeds into his mouth; the sweet rot of life, and part of him, the rattling pulse of his beast, knows he'll savor it till he chokes on it.

(Will doesn't stay.

Hannibal tells himself it doesn't matter. The pain of separation disagrees, Will's wound on his neck a second pulse that sits and bleeds.)

Will fucks him in an alley a mere few blocks away from the display he'd made of Freddie's corpse, days later. The lewd sound of skin slapping skin, the way Hannibal can't help Will's name from leaving his mouth, the way Will's teeth crunch down on the words he whispers against the marks he leaves, are damning in and of themselves. Worse is the trail of outer articles at the mouth of this particular alley, gloves and hats and coats, leaving warmth to their bodies, to sex.

Hannibal says nothing about anything, when Will comes in him, when Will dresses up and walks away like it meant nothing. He says nothing, clutching the wound Will reopened again, the scar in the making that feels like a heartbeat.

Alana says nothing, later, when she finds him in his office staring at the wall.

She doesn’t need to. Her eyes say everything he doesn’t want to hear.

He offers her a beer, and he takes a wine glass. They talk about everything else, in his black leather seats, and his mind catches on Will Graham regardless.

His heart lingers on Will Graham regardless.

“You could do a referral,” she murmurs as she leaves.

Hannibal smiles, and presses a kiss to her cheek.

“He wouldn’t accept it, even if I were in a position to do so.”

You’re in love, her eyes accuse, pity and affection dripping from them like photons falling from the sun. A warm pain, as he stares in them without protection.

“I know,” he voices.

Her smile is sad.

She does not say *I told you so.*

He takes care in the display, gathering the burnt flesh with a delicacy he’s well-versed in. He imbues the clasped hands with his devotion, extracts his love with the borrowed arms, crafts destructive impulses into a creative fuel that won’t eat at him.

Won’t leave him a husk and ash, half a whole, dependent on another.

Shiva, destroyer and creator.

Shiva offers man cleansing, destroying impurities from his thoughts. The duality and convenience of it appeals to him.

Praise for Will, punishment for himself.

(His thoughts, his beast, this roaring flame beneath his skin finds peace only at Will’s touch, aching for him like a severed limb. A part of this offering is prayer, prayer to gods long dead, gods that may have never existed, a prayer for cleansing.

He chokes on love and ash, and lets himself burn.)

“Was it Will?” Abigail asks.

“No. It wasn’t him.”

“Do you trust him?” Abigail asks.

“No.”

“Liar,” Abigail says.

“Trust is earned.”

“Not if you love them.”

Abigail steps closer to him, blue eyes wide and warm.

“Do you love him?”

“Yes,” he says.

Abigail says nothing, because there’s nothing left to say. The scar says it all, the bite brand on the junction of his neck and shoulder that hasn’t healed. Will never heal.

He wouldn’t allow this, if he didn’t love Will.

He wouldn’t do this, if he didn’t love Will.

Ortolan buntings and shared corpses. Manipulations and games. Rotting kisses, and fading sex.

It can’t last, he knows. It won’t last, he knows.

But he wants it to.

He needs it to.

“We could disappear now. Tonight. Feed your dogs, leave a note for Alana, and never see her or Jack again. Almost polite.”

Betrayal is thick and malodorous in the fabric of Will’s coat, cutting his dreams and heart to shreds with surgical precision. He’s been dragged from heaven to reality, and it hurts. It offends.

He feels the pulse of the mark Will's engraved in his throat, the wound Hannibal had allowed to scar, and it feels like the ticking metric of a liar. The screech of a lie detector, as the heart accelerates and the blood vessels constrict.

He hadn't anticipated looking at Will and seeing nothing but betrayal. He hadn't expected love to curdle like soured milk in his throat, the brimming loss of grief and anger as he sees the forest for the trees and the lie in hand-spun dreams.

"Then this would be our last supper," Will replies, watching the ash of patient notes merge in the fire, debris lost to decay.

"Of this life. We'll serve lamb."

"Sacrificial," Will remarks, and Hannibal can't stand the sight of him. Can't stand the earnest falsities weaved so expertly around him, the taste of Will's skin and cock, the memory of every reaction and twitch when he's fucked, the sensation of being torn apart metaphysically, parted like the Red Sea and left to bleed.

"I don't need a sacrifice," Hannibal murmurs, eyes wet with loss and confessions trapped in the cage of his chest, "do you?"

"I need him to know," Will says, conviction dripping from his tongue as his jaw clenches. "If I confess to Jack Crawford right now–"

"I would forgive you," Hannibal interrupts, stripped nude in the exposing moonbeams of Will's eyes. He wonders if control would have been easier, had Randall not robbed him of agency and his faculties. Had his mind not played him so thoroughly. Had his body not submitted to things he should've known better than allowing. Will Graham wormed his way under every inch of his skin, the endless flame his blood burns as, and Hannibal can't cut him out. "If Jack were to tell you all is forgiven, would you accept his forgiveness?"

"Jack isn't offering forgiveness. He wants... Justice. He wants to see you, see who you are. See what I've become. He wants the truth."

Hannibal and Jack's agendas align, and Hannibal turns his back on Will with a curled lip.

"To the truth, then. And all its consequences."

Hannibal doesn't let Will touch him that night. Doesn't let the love of his life strip him bare in the shifting shadows of his home, doesn't allow the masochistic pleasure of Will's touch and Will's apple-sweet lies.

Hannibal doesn't let Will have sex with him, because everything was a lie. Because he's caught on the fishhook, and squirming only makes it sink deeper. Because Abigail was right. He never should have trusted Will Graham.

(He fucks a stranger on the night of the full moon, before his beast is set to shed his skin and his weakness. Part of him hopes that losing himself in another will work, that it might halt the transformation, but it never has and never would.

He eats the stranger whole, strips the skin from skeleton and the ribs from the chest cavity, sups the blood from veins, the marrow from bone. No part is left untouched, untasted. He is consumed entirely, by every meaning of the word. Consumer and consumed in reflux, hungry and aching, lonely as the stars in the sky light years away.

His wolf howls at the moon, in the direction of Wolf Trap, Virginia, grieving the loss of a mate.)

Abigail never meant to care.

A part of her had seen Hannibal Lecter's poisoned promises, puppet-string offers, as opportunity. A benefactor of sorts. Someone to get her out of the hellscape she'd made of her life with her dad gone and his scar on her throat. Someone to buffer Jack Crawford's abrasive battering, his insistence on pressing until she suffocated under the weight of her father's (her) crimes.

But Hannibal was kind. Not the normal sort of kind, not meaningless compliments and selfish offers. He was kind in his acceptance, coaxing darkness from her without judgment, kind in his approval, doled out and weighted in implication. She found herself viewing him through a familial lens, and hated it. It wasn't the plan, to care.

So she dug up Nicholas Boyle's body, and hung herself to dry.

And Hannibal still offered her rebirth over the empty shell of death.

Love came quickly, in the gentle brush of his hand on her hair. In the accented praise before the music room's fireplace as she played songs he taught her. In the way he'd look at her with a toothy grin, and she'd know down to her bones he *meant* it. Love came and stayed.

She found care fluttered behind her breast, care that only grew. Only blossomed.

It's why she finds herself making Hannibal cups of tea in the early hours once a month, the day after the full moon. It's why she tries to help him, tries to protect him in the small ways

she can. Hiding bodies he doesn't. Disposing of evidence he misses. Following him when he shifts, when she realizes he's not wholly human anymore.

He never remembers, for all his beast curls into her touch, maroon eyes intelligent and gentle despite the blood-matted fur and gore caught in teeth. Even at his worst, he does not hurt her.

It makes it easier to do what's needed, when the kitchen-scene calls, when they reach the crescendo of Will's betrayal, and Will lowers the gun.

"We couldn't leave without you," Hannibal says, eyes veined with gold as his voice breaks, thick and wet and horribly human.

Abigail blinks back tears, and watches the flash of a knife shine in Hannibal's hand. Watches Will step into Hannibal's touch, as his face is cupped. He loves Hannibal too, she thinks. In a way Hannibal can't understand. A way she barely understands. It should mean something. Should change something.

Maybe, in another world, it does.

But this is not that world.

(Love makes Hannibal's hand hesitate, and she knows she could have loved Will. Would have, had he not betrayed Hannibal. Had he not chosen Jack, had he picked their family over pre-existing moral binds.

Love makes Hannibal's knife rest against the fabric of Will's shirt, and Will's eyes are too busy scanning over Hannibal's broken features to notice her sneak it in.)

She sees the image in Hannibal's mind clearly: a jagged smile to remember the family he lost.

Hannibal slips in the blood, flickering between gold and maroon as his love bleeds on the floor at their knife, and Abigail wishes it could have been different. Wishes Will knew himself better.

"We have to go," she murmurs, pressing her lips against the rise of his cheekbone, intertwining her fingers with his as she pulls him along and away, not looking Will in the eyes as he continues to gasp, as he continues to bleed. "We have a plan."

"Abigail…"

"Trust me," she pleads. "Please, Dad?"

Abigail Hobbs never meant to care. Hannibal Lecter never meant to love. They both are covered in blood, but Hannibal lets her lead him away.

End Notes

hehehehhehehehehehe I may do a sequel.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!